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NAVAJO TIMES

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ARTS, ENTERTAINMENT & CULTURE

The inner child

"Pete & Cleo" tells a story every Navajo family can enjoy

By Jan-Mikael Patterson
Navajo Times

WINDOW ROCK, July 15, 2010

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There's no better analogy to describe "Pete & Cleo," the latest film from Holt Hamilton Productions, than a peanut butter and jelly sandwich - it uses different ingredients to produce a delicious snack.

The film hits close to home with a story that almost anyone on the Navajo Reservation can relate to.

The story involves two brothers who reconnect and pester one another about the directions they've each chosen in life. Cleo (Beau Benally) is on spring break from college, while Pete (Ernest Tsosie III) is the sibling who stayed at home. Not one afternoon passes before the two are at odds over their differing values and views of the world.

Their mother (Ethel Begay) chases them out of the house and orders them to clean out the hogan, which is filled with junk the two have accumulated throughout their lifetime. As the brothers take turns excavating the long-forgotten stuff they've stored, both encounter memories from childhood.

Pete represents the traditional Navajo way of thinking, while Cleo is impatient with the old ways and sure of what he knows.



(Courtesy photo) Comedian and actor Ernest David Tsosie, left, and Beau Benally, right, were caught on location filming a scene for their recent film "Pete & Cleo," which premiered at the Navajo Nation Museum on July 8.

to sheep



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With his master's degree in sight, Cleo's world revolves around books and he has a budding taste for Western-style luxury, preferring a five-star hotel to camping out.

He looks to science to explain the world, while his brother looks to the lessons given by the Holy People.

The film, which was shot on location in Fort Defiance, Kayenta, Black Rock and Oak Springs, hits home with realistic themes like tradition versus the modern world and the pull of city life versus reservation life.

The film's message, however, is that no matter which direction you choose the love a family shares is the strongest anchor you can have.

"Pete & Cleo" premiered July 8 to a half-filled auditorium at the Navajo Nation Museum, yet the laughter was plentiful enough to make it sound like a sellout.

"Watching you watch the movie is something that I enjoyed," director Travis Hamilton told the audience during a Q&A session following the premier.

This is Hamilton's third film about Navajos and despite not growing up in the culture he does an admirable job of capturing the details that add up to a believable portrait of Navajo life.

Hamilton says part of his secret is that he lets the actors take a big hand in creating the dialogue for "Pete & Cleo." His own ear may not be attuned to the nuances of phrasing, tone and word usage that make up Navajo English, but it flowed naturally from the actors.

The story is nicely executed with veteran actors Tsosie and Benally, appearing in their third film together.

"I knew that when I hired these guys they would do the job," said Hamilton, noting that he did not hold auditions before picking his cast.

"Being an older brother myself, I used from that experience," Tsosie said.

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"If anything, people should go home and clean out their storage," he joked. "Watching the film I can relate to it in a lot of ways. We attempted this twice. The first time without a script."

After studying the footage, the actors and director worked with one another and a script was drafted. Tsosie praised Hamilton for allowing the actors so much creative freedom.

Benally said he approached the role of Cleo with an idea in mind, but welcomed Tsosie's improvisation and says the older actor helped him to stay loose and natural in his role.

"I had fun working with (Tsosie)," Benally said. "I'm glad to have worked with him. He made it easier for me not just in preparing but helped to relax in between takes. When the cameras rolled, that's when I got serious but he helped keep the atmosphere relaxed.

"This character is outside of what I'm used to," Benally said. "I never really got a chance to find out who Cleo really was but I think that the ending, that's where we find the character of Cleo."

Having been in the shoes of Pete, I know how it can be, to feel left out or left behind when a younger sibling returns home with his new learning. With education comes an arrogance that can annoy others easily. Believe me, I know.

Technically speaking, Hamilton's filmmaking still has a rough, indy feel to it, but the story and the humor in "Pete & Cleo" are enough to make you want to watch it again.

The audience reaction was proof of his success: The laughter hardly subsided throughout the film. It's got the kind of humor only brothers have between them. And anything with Tsosie and Benally is worth the time to watch.

Of course the film isn't just about the laughs. There is also drama, the kind that people will understand and probably have experienced themselves.

If nothing else, the one lesson you should take from this film is this: The inner child in all of us never dies, it just gets better with age.

To arrange a screening of "Pete & Cleo" in your community, contact Travis Hamilton at travis@hhprod.com.

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Supporter of Navajo Talent

Hey, anything to promote family harmony. Can't wait to see it. Is this film coming to PHX anytime soon here? I like that finally someone is trying to tell stories about Navajos and using REAL Navajo actors and talent. Hope one day to see a film production that is entirely NAVAJO created. Thank you Hamilton

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When is Blue Gap Boyz 2 Coming Out???

I saw this movie 4 sale @ a Hopi flea market. Didn't buy though cuz I wasn't sure if it was a good copy. Can't wait 2 buy the original copy. Love Tsosie's character reminds me of my uncle. Hey, Uncle Charles. This 1 is 4 u. 🤔

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